

***“Marketing Violence to Children”***

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you, Senator Brownback, for inviting me to testify today. For several years you have been studying the relationship between our coarsened popular culture and youth violence. As a government official and private citizen, I have been doing the same thing. Now more than ever, we have good reason to pursue this matter.

Most of you know that I am a conservative Republican, which I have been for 13 years. But I was also proud to be a Democrat for 22 years. And one of the things proud Democrats do is read the *New Republic*. I still read the *New Republic* occasionally and want to commend an article in its most recent issue by Greg Easterbrook.

Here are the first two paragraphs of the article, which talk about the 1996 slasher/so-called “ironic-comedy” movie, *Scream*. The movie was produced by Disney’s Miramax division. Easterbrook writes:

Millions of teens have seen the 1996 movie *Scream*, a box-office and home-rental hit. Critics adored the film. The *Washington Post* declared that it “deftly mixes irony, self-reference, and social wry commentary.” The *Los Angeles Times* hailed it as “a bravura, provocative send-up.” *Scream* opens with a scene in which a teenage girl is forced to watch her jock boyfriend tortured and then disemboweled by two fellow students who, it will eventually be learned, want revenge on anyone from high school who crossed them. After jock boy’s stomach is shown cut open and he dies screaming, the killers stab and torture the girl, then cut her throat and hang her body from a tree so that Mom can discover it when she drives up. A dozen students and teachers are graphically butchered in the film, while the characters make running jokes about murder. At one point, a boy tells a big-breasted friend she’d better be careful because the stacked girls always get it in horror films. In the next scene, she’s grabbed, stabbed through the breasts, and murdered.... The movie builds to a finale in which one of the killers announces that he and his accomplice started off by murdering strangers but then realized it was a lot more fun to kill their friends.

Mr. Easterbrook goes on to write:

Now that two Colorado high schoolers have murdered twelve classmates and a teacher – often, it appears, first taunting their pleading victims, just like celebrity stars do in the movies! – some commentators have dismissed the role of violence in the images shown to the young ... But mass murders by the young, once phenomenally rare, are suddenly on the increase. Can it be coincidence that this increase is happening at the same time that Hollywood has begun to market the notion that mass murder is fun?

Mr. Easterbrook's question is a very good one. According to several accounts, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris enjoyed killing their classmates and teacher. They laughed and hollered, said one survivor, "like it was, like, exciting."

According to media reports, it turns out that Klebold and Harris were fans, even devotees, of a lot in our popular culture. Classmates have said that they listened to, among others, the shock rocker Marilyn Manson, who refers to himself as the "God of F\*\*\*." Manson recently said that "the end of the world is all we have to look forward to – I'm just pushing the fast-forward button and letting you enjoy the ride." People like Manson do not simply rise by themselves out of America's basements; they are bankrolled by some of America's oldest and most respected corporations.

Mr. Chairman, let me here recall a story that I think bears on the subject of today's hearing. In 1995, when Seagram Co. purchased a 50 percent stake in Interscope Records, which included Manson's albums, Edgar Bronfman Jr., the president and CEO of Seagram, called me to request a meeting. I agreed to it, and in January 1996, Bronfman flew to Washington.

Bronfman's purpose was to allay my concerns and to preempt criticisms by me and my colleagues Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) and C. DeLores Tucker of the National Political Congress of Black Women regarding Seagram's purchase. During the meeting, he told me the deal he was making with Interscope would allow him to refuse to distribute music he deemed inappropriate. Bronfman assured me that there were "lines we will not cross," that Seagram would not profit by disseminating objectionable music. "Watch us and judge us," Bronfman said.

I took him at his word. I praised his willingness to make normative judgments and to conclude that some music was beyond the pale. It turns out, however, that either his word that day was no good or his definition of objectionable music is far different from mine. Consider these words from Marilyn Manson's song "Irresponsible Hate Anthem": "Hey, victim, should I black your eyes again?/ Hey, victim,/You were the one who put the stick in my hand/I am the ism, my hate's a prism/Let's just kill everyone and let your God sort them out/F\*\*\*, it, F\*\*\* it, F\*\*\* it, F\*\*\*/ Everybody's someone else's nigger .../I wasn't born with enough middle fingers." One of the photos

on Manson's *Antichrist Superstar* album pictures Manson's genitals hooked up to a hose which drains into the mouths of two men, kneeling, zombie-like, on either side of him. *Antichrist Superstar* did not disappoint Mr. Bronfman; it rose to Number 3 on the Billboard Album Survey.

Seagram, as an industry leader and self-professed setter of standards, should stop its support of lyrics that are unworthy of human consumption. Your colleague Sen. Lieberman and I have written letters to Seagram's board of directors and to major stockholders, urging them to use their influence to clean up the music that Seagram distributes. And I have asked Bronfman to publicly debate these issues, in Los Angeles, in New York, anywhere. But so far, all we have heard from one of the world's largest communications corporations and its board is the Sound of Silence.

This is one of the things you should continue to debate: what effect does the popular culture have on the young. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates said that "musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace." Rhythm and harmony are still fastening themselves on to children's souls; today, however, much of the music they listen to is imparting mournfulness, darkness, despair, a sense of death.

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Mr. Chairman, the events in Littleton were catastrophic for the Columbine students and their families. And it was a horrible moment for this country not just because what happened was so terrible but because it raises questions about key parts of American life. This is a moment that demands hard questions about schools, about parenting, about guns, and about the entertainment industry.

Although today's hearing focuses on the latter, let me say a word about the gun issue and how it relates to what we are talking about. My view on this is that if somebody is a pro-gun ideologue and says "we can't talk about guns in this issue," they do not have much to contribute to this discussion. Similarly, if some shameless Hollywood ideologue says "we can't talk about the influence of movies or television on this," they do not have much to contribute either. In the matter of the protection of our children, nothing should be off-limits. The issue, obviously, involves a bundle of things. We

should talk about all of them.

Most of us already know that too many of our movies, television shows, music songs, and video games are filled with trash: grisly murder scenes, dismemberment and disembowelment, nonstop profanity, rape and torture scenarios. The relevant questions are: Does it matter and, if it does, how much and what can we do about it?

Almost no one, except for a few blinded by financial stakes, thinks that the popular culture is not having a coarsening effect on our kids. The evidence, empirical and anecdotal, is overwhelming. It is clear, abundant, and it is common-sensical. You will hear some of it today.

Now for some kids – a small percentage – movies, music, television, the Internet make no difference in their lives; they simply are not affected by the stuff. For most kids, however, the popular culture works as a coarsener, desensitizer, and dehumanizer. That is why most parents, although they are not alarmed or revolting in the streets, are deeply worried. They feel as if they are swimming upstream, fighting against faceless television, movie, and music executives who are fighting against them. This is a very serious problem. We should study it and find out more about it.

But another difficulty is in the very small percentage of kids who are, for all intents and purposes, taken over by the popular culture. Who see the violent movies as a game plan. Who hear the dark, pounding music as a hymn. Who are basically severed and metaphysically separated from their parents, families, and communities. Who begin, as Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold did, to live in a dark parallel universe.

Obviously, this is not simply the work of producers or advertisers. But it may be partly the product of their work. If they believe it is not, then the Edgar Bronfmans, Howard Stringers, Michael Eisners, and Oliver Stones of the world should explain why. As you well know, Senators, this is something they have been unwilling to do. Recall when the tobacco executives were called to testify before Congress and then bombarded with questions about nicotine and other poisonous additives. That was more than a public hearing; it was a public shaming.

The same thing, in my opinion, should happen with the bigshots from

Hollywood and Madison Avenue. (My hunch is that they will ignore you as they did today.) But here are a few questions you might ask them if they do show up:

- Was the scene showing human brains splattered on the car seat a necessary part of your artistic statement? What was the point of including lyrics about child murder and molestation?
- Do you understand the difference between gratuitous violence that simply titillates and violence that serves a purpose in telling a larger story? Can you distinguish between *Casino* and *MacBeth*, between *The Basketball Diaries* and *Braveheart*?
- Who came up with the marketing term “tweens” – referring to kids between age eight and 12 – and what exactly are you aiming at them?
- How much money are you spending on targeting young adolescent males? Do you use violence as a “hook”? Have you conducted in-depth market research on whether blood and gore appeal to younger audiences?
- If so, do you need to do this? Can you make your money in a less destructive way? Or is this cultural pollution absolutely necessary? Is this predatory capitalism worthy of your corporation’s name?
- Are you at least ashamed when you aim to corner the youth market with images of senseless violence and sex?

I will repeat what I have previously said several times before: I am a virtual absolutist on the First Amendment. All of us have a right to make, produce, and sell *almost* anything we want. But the more important question, at least morally and constitutionally, is not so different from the one asked of gun manufacturers. Should you develop, market, promote, and sell something regardless of how degrading or destructive it is?

If we ask the gun manufacturers to regulate themselves responsibly, which we do (and much more), then at least we should ask the entertainment industry to act responsibly (better than trying to regulate them from Washington). We should ask them what they are doing and why they are doing it. Again, I urge you to take that action. There are some “gun nuts” in the country, of course;

now is an appropriate time to uncover the country's "filth nuts." Some will go on to say that as a percentage of all movies, music, and television, the destructive trash is only a small part. I would respond to this claim by pointing out that the gun folks retort is that only a small percentage of guns are used illegally.

Finally, let me defuse in advance one of my critic's arguments -- that we are focusing on the wrong problem when we talk about popular culture since other countries, like Japan, consume the same movies and music that we do but are among the most peaceful nations on earth. Professor Daniel Polsby wrote an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he made the following point: If firearms increase violence and crime, then the rates of violence and crime in Switzerland, New Zealand, and Israel should be higher since their "number of firearms per civilian household is comparable to that in the United States."

The point -- and fact -- is that we are a complicated country. We are different in many ways from other countries. Our violence is one of those differences. While we are the greatest country in the world, we are also one of its most coarse and most violent. That is not something to celebrate. It is a shame, and needs to be treated that way. By parents, by Congress, and by the entertainment industry.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering questions from members of the committee.